

YOU AGAINST THE RACE COURSE

By Bill Draheim

In the 30 or so years that I've raced sailboats my successes have come in a wide variety of boats and I attribute my versatility to some things I learned from another multi-class champion, Bruce Goldsmith (Winner of the Flying Scot Championship in 1979). Bruce was possibly the single most talented one-design sailor in the country during his peak racing days and offered to me what I consider a sound approach to sailboat racing.

**The underlying goal is to beat the racecourse,
not your competitors.**

Head into a race realizing others on the course have as much talent as you and they will be spending the entire race going as fast and being as smart as possible. This being true rules out a number of moves so often seen on the course. For example, you will lose ground on the racecourse if you luff boats off wind or pinch boats to weather of you after the start or after a leebow tack. Remember, while you're luffing above course or pinching and going slow, others with equal talent to you are going straight and fast! The "Rock Stars" really don't make the boats go much faster than the good weekend sailor, which is so often evident by the close proximity of boats at the first weather mark. How often do you hear at the beer keg after a race, "I was right next to Eventual Winner going up the first beat". Well, Eventual Winner got around the first mark along with a couple of other disciplined sailors just ahead of the pack and his or her group sailed smart, staying off of each other's wind and pointing at the next mark. The pack just behind was not so disciplined, each taking turns at trying to steal each others wind but having little success. By the time everyone realized the boat in front of them was just as smart as they were, and capable of defending their position, the only course left to the jibe mark was sailing slow dead down wind. Virtually the same scenario for this group developed on the second downwind leg. By the time Eventual Winner and his or her smart buddies got to the leeward mark, they were 200 yards ahead of the pack and the race was over for the chasers. Why? The chasers refused to point their boats at the marks. This is the most misunderstood concept of off wind racing! Sometimes it's not that you think you can blow over the top of the boat in front, it's that you feel that you're going faster and will hit them if you don't go above. Generally you're bringing breeze with you as you approach the boat ahead. Eventually this boat will get the breeze, their speed will increase and will stay ahead. Even if you get to the point where you can touch this boat, your smart course is to go below, this puts you working on getting inside at the jibe mark. On the second reach, going below the boat ahead won't put you inside at the leeward mark but does allow both boats to point at the mark. Remember, when sailing off wind and in close proximity to another boat, he or she is as smart as you and will not let you roll over the top.

Upwind it is also possible to lose distance to the racecourse if you get overly concerned about beating other boats. Sailboat racing is not like car racing, you don't pick off boats one at a time, you sail as smart and as fast as possible all the time, never slowing down to mess with nearby boats! Possibly more important than sailing fast upwind is sailing smart (going the right way). The following situation happens at every regatta, but never should. For example, you're on starboard tack because you're on the lifted tack and going the correct direction; a port tack boat can't quite cross you so you must make a decision. You could either yell "starboard" or allow this boat to cross ahead of you. If you yell "starboard" this boat will tack in a leebow position and affect your air, eventually you will have to tack away. If you make a slight duck and allow this boat to cross, you will continue on the lifted tack and head the direction you wish to go. Remember, whether on port or starboard, you have made your decision because it is the direction you want to go. Don't let other boats inadvertently influence your choice. Too often going upwind, I also come up against the world's greatest pincher. It is tempting to try to out point boats around you letting them know you possess the skill of ultra high grove sailing. Again, the problem with this game of temporary pinching results in a net loss for the boats forced into the game. Somewhere else on the racecourse someone with equal talent to you is going at full speed in the direction they want, and making gains on the racecourse!

In conclusion, do your best to race Mother Nature around the racecourse and use other boats on the course simply as gauges to check your speed and as indicators of what the velocity and direction of wind is doing around you. Not only will racing against the course improve your results, but also reduce your trips to the protest room making the race more fun for everyone. I've had the pleasure of racing with many of this country's great racers and they seem to have a number of things in common, the most important one being they rarely end up in the protest room. This leaves more time to soak up knowledge at the post race beer drinking and lie telling sessions! Good luck and beat the course next time out.

Good Sailing,

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